

# WEBSITE STUDY: WHAT INFORMATION ARE PROSPECTIVE GRADUATE STUDENTS SEEKING?

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## ABSTRACT

*The purpose of this website study was to get feedback from recently admitted students to discover if the site was meeting their needs and expectations for information regarding the program and processes. Websites are often the first contact a student has with a university and, especially for those seeking a degree online, could potentially leave students with more questions than answers. After a thorough examination of the current website, an open-ended survey was created and distributed through SurveyMonkey in an attempt to gather information regarding the content and usability of the current site.*

*Because of the responses, changes were made to the content and layout of the website including links to provide easy access to the application, tuition information, and academic calendar. Included in this paper is background information on websites and the department, as well as the purpose, results, list of improvements, and future planned phases. As a result of this study it was anticipated that issues would be brought to light and would lead the department to make effective changes that would improve the experiences of online students that rely on internet based resources for their information.*

## INTRODUCTION

Almost all major universities allow potential students, undergraduate and graduate, to gather information about the university, learn about departments and majors, apply to the university, start the financial aid process and then when admitted they can register for classes and pay tuition and fees online. The department that was the focus of this study has a totally online component for the Ed.D. degree in certain concentrations. The totally online component was launched in 2012. However, the department has been using online delivery for some courses since 2006. Starting in 2012 all classes and all administrative functions from application and screening interview to dissertation defense can be accomplished online.

## RELATED LITERATURE

While the function of a website may seem obvious, a different design and functionality needs to be in place for

degrees that are offered through online delivery. Websites today are considered an essential part of doing business in higher education and have come a long way since the early 1990s when very few prospective students had a personal computer. According to a 2007 study, 98% of the 27,826 respondents reported owning at least two technological devices, and the mean amount of time spent on these devices for all respondents was 18 hours per week (Caruso & Salaway, 2008). In 2013, it was reported by *Marketingcharts.com* that an average 18 to 34 year-old college student owned about 7 technology devices. In 2015 with seemingly constant technological contact, websites are often the first contact a potential student has with a college or university. Websites must now have marketing components while simultaneously acting as a primary hub for information. The design of the website should be efficient and student centered so that students have a positive experience. There is great potential for students to have a negative reaction if their experience with a college website

is filled with inaccurate or disjointed information that is difficult to navigate (Shea, 2005; Shorr, 2014).

## PURPOSE

The purpose of this study was to evaluate the existing website for a graduate degree department at a regional, 4-year public university that housed four totally online M.Ed. and Ed.D. programs. The study was conducted in three phases. The first phase of the study was to document what information was currently on the website. The second phase of the study was a survey of Ed.D. students that had recently entered the program. This open-ended survey was designed to discover what information students wanted to obtain as of result of an interest in the program. The third phase of the study was to use the information gained in phase two to redesign the department website to include information that prospective students needed to make an informed decision about applying to the program.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The sample for this study was doctoral students in the most recent cohorts admitted to our Ed.D. programs. The motivation for this research was the realization that the department did not know how well we were meeting the needs of prospective students. A survey was created in *SurveyMonkey* and distributed to online cohorts of newly admitted Ed.D. students. We received 53 responses. Questions were developed based on information noted during the first phase of the study to discover what information prospective students were looking for when visiting the department website, and determining if those needs were being met. Each question on the survey gave the students options to choose and a space to fill in their more specific needs or concerns. The following five questions are examples of the type of questions that were asked:

1. How many times did you visit the Department website before deciding the program was the right fit for you?
2. Based on what you found on the website, what influenced your decision to apply to ELPA?
3. What information/resources were you looking for on the Department website?
4. After visits to the website, what information did you find most helpful?
5. What additional features do you suggest to improve the website to meet your current needs and needs of future applicants?

## FINDINGS

Data were collected over a two-semester span from the initial distribution. Of the 53 doctoral students that responded over 59% reported that they visited the department website five or more times before deciding the program was the right fit for their needs. Almost all of respondents were influenced to apply to the program based on the program being offered fully online (93%). The reputation of the program (60%), the marketability of the degree (70%), a description of the classes (70%), and conversations held with ELPA staff (62%) were all indicated on the survey by a majority of the participants as being important information about the program. Clear guidelines (30%), tuition assistance information (34%), qualifications of the faculty (42%), and location of University (36%) were indicated less often but were selected by some respondents. Table 1 displays the frequencies and percent of students selecting the choices in question 2.

| What influenced your decision to apply to this program? | N     | %  |
|---|-------|----|
| Program totally online                                  | 49/53 | 93 |
| Reputation of the program                               | 30/53 | 60 |
| Marketability of the degree                             | 37/53 | 70 |
| Description of the classes                              | 37/53 | 70 |
| Conversations held with ELPA staff                      | 31/53 | 62 |
| Clear guidelines  | 16/53 | 30 |
| Tuition assistance information                          | 18/53 | 34 |
| Qualifications of the faculty                           | 22/53 | 41 |
| Location of ETSU  | 19/53 | 36 |

According to respondents, admission requirements (98%) and course information (96%) were the most sought after information on the department website. The cost of the program (79%) and information on the program expectations and requirements (70%) were also important. Internship and residency requirements and faculty resumes were indicated as being important to more than 50% of the respondents. Table 2 displays the frequencies and percent of students selecting the choices in question 3.

| What information were you looking for on the website? | N/Total | %  |
|---|---------|----|
| Cost of the program                                   | 42/53   | 79 |
| Course information                                    | 51/53   | 96 |
| Requirements for admission                            | 52/53   | 98 |
| Expectations and program requirements                 | 37/53   | 70 |
| Internship information                                | 29/53   | 55 |
| Residency information                                 | 27/53   | 51 |
| Faculty resumes and accomplishments                   | 27/53   | 51 |

When asked about what information was most helpful after visiting the department website, respondents indicated that program information (100%), requirements for admission (100%), information about faculty and staff (83%), and a link to the School of Graduate Studies (74%) were indicated most often as being helpful. Information on internship sites and residency was rated as helpful to 51% of the respondents. Table 3 displays the frequencies and percent of students selecting the choices in question 4.

| What information was most helpful on the website? | N     | %   |
|---|-------|-----|
| Information about programs                        | 53/53 | 100 |
| Requirements for admission                        | 53/53 | 100 |
| A link to the School of Graduate Studies          | 39/53 | 74  |
| Information about faculty and staff               | 44/53 | 83  |
| Residency and internship information              | 27/53 | 51  |
| Qualifying exam information                       | 20/53 | 38  |

The participants in the study were asked to indicate what additional elements would be helpful in their decision about applying to the program. Easier access to application deadlines (100%), and YouTube introduction videos (100%) were most often indicated as important. Information about graduation rates (79%), an Apply Now direct link to the online applications (81%), and a link to our tuition calculator (70%) were also indicated as desired

elements for the website. A complete list is presented in Table 4.

| What additional features do you suggest for the department website? | N     | %*  |
|---|-------|-----|
| Easier access to deadlines  | 41/53 | 100 |
| YouTube introduction video  | 41/53 | 100 |
| Chat area   | 28/53 | 53  |
| Videos of expectations  | 35/53 | 66  |
| Examples of appropriate internship sites                            | 27/53 | 51  |
| Time management   | 14/53 | 26  |
| Better organization of materials                                    | 8/53  | 15  |
| Statistics on graduation rates                                      | 42/53 | 79  |
| Tuition calculator  | 37/53 | 70  |
| Apply now button  | 43/53 | 81  |

\*Total percent does not equal 100% because respondents could select multiple items

Table 5 displays the types of requests for additional information beyond what is on the website. The numbers here seem to indicate that most questions are addressed with the information that is available.

| Did you send emails for information in addition to what you were looking for on the website? | N     | %  |
|--|-------|----|
| Information about the application process  | 29/53 | 55 |
| Information about registration after acceptance  | 29/53 | 55 |
| Clarification about residency  | 20/53 | 38 |
| Clarification regarding internships  | 17/53 | 32 |
| Departmental deadlines for milestones  | 20/53 | 38 |
| Tuition reimbursement paperwork  | 9/53  | 17 |

Respondents were asked to rate the website in three areas: Ease of Navigation, Organization of the Website, and Content of the Website. A rating of 3 was the most fa-

avorable and a rating of 1 was the least favorable. Figures 1, 2, and 3 display the results of these ratings. For Ease of Navigation, 77.3% of the responses tended to be favorable, either a 2 or 3. When rating the Organization of the Website, the majority of the responses (60.4%) were in the mid-range. The responses for the Content of the Website was very favorable with over 86% indicating a positive rating. Table 6 displays the number of respondents for each of the three areas.

| Rating the Department Website   | N     |       |       |
|---------------------------------|-------|-------|-------|
|                                 | 1     | 2     | 3     |
| Ease of navigation              | 12/53 | 12/53 | 29/53 |
| Organization of the website     | 10/53 | 32/53 | 11/53 |
| Content included on the website | 7/53  | 12/53 | 34/53 |

### Improvements

Based on the results from our survey it is evident that we are providing online students with a great deal of important information. However, some potential students are still left feeling disconnected from campus and have unanswered questions. Suggestions from the survey were used to make adjustments and additions to the website in an effort to better meet the needs of our online cohorts. As previously reported, students cited the need for easier access to deadlines and requirements, better organization of materials, cost information, and clearer information regarding application and registration. On the Admission page an "Apply Now" button was added, a link to a tuition calculator, a link to the financial aid department, and a link to the academic calendar. In addition, all information was streamlined to improve readability.

Other changes included updating faculty resumes, condensing information on the homepage for easier readability and the use of "snippets" to give the page a modern feel. It is important to note that the web content management system used at participating university does limit certain changes such as color scheme, placement of items, and headers which are specified by the university. Specific pages that held program details were refreshed to clarify expectations, and links were provided to ease access to certain campus resources such as the Dissertation Bootcamp and the Graduate Student Success Specialist. Pages that house information about areas of concentration were

also updated to clarify information, give more detailed information on expectations, access to the application process, and clarification about online delivery and online cohorts.

### Future Phases

The department has made numerous improvements to the website. However, there are future phases for the study and for the site currently being put into action. The department is also currently planning to create *YouTube* welcome videos and other videos explaining expectations and requirements for the programs. Another area that is being studied is a chat area where students can ask questions and get answers through the website or on our social medial sites. Graduation rates and job placement information is another area the department is currently collecting data from the university. This information will be published on the website for prospective students to use in their decision to apply to the program.

### CONCLUSION

As a result of the website study, the information provided on the site has been updated to better meet the needs of prospective and current students. The changes that have been made thus far and the changes intended for the future are set in place to ensure that our online students have access to the same resources and feel the same sense of community as our traditional on-ground students. Websites are proving to be one of the most important resources for students, and this survey enabled the department to determine how useful of a resource we have been providing to prospective students in their search for information regarding programs and degrees.

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